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EDUCATION FOR ALL BY THE YEAR 2000:

A CHALLENGE BEFORE THE WORLD COMMUNITY

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NARRATOR: Perspective, on an issue of international concern. In this edition, Elementary Education for All by the Year 2000 - A Challenge before the World Community. I am Ceciwa Khonje.

When a billion people, one fifth of humanity cannot read or write, when 100 million children in the world have no chance of schooling, something needs to be done urgently.

That was the challenge before the World Conference on Education for All, which was held at Jomtien, Thailand, from March 5th to the 9th. Here with a brief outline of the problem is Mahbub Ahmad:

Cut 1
Mahbub
UN Radio

The World Conference on Education for All was convened in recognition of the fact that our world is constantly being redefined by new knowledge. Scientific and technological innovations have made possible the production of more food, the treatment of more ailments and the success of every society depends on its ability to effectively absorb and use this knowledge.

Education, the Conference sponsors stated, is the basic requirement for development. Yet, to this day, in this information age, the most basic education remains beyond the reach of 100 million children in the world. Over 900 million adults are illiterate.

NARRATOR: In a message to the World Conference, delivered by Shah Kibria, Executive-Secretary of the Economic and Social Commission of Asia and the Pacific, ESCAP, Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar drew attention to the fact that education was, above all, a fundamental human right:

Cut 2
Shah Kibria
(on behalf of S.G.)
World Conference
on Education
for All
Jomtien (Thailand)
5-9 March 1990

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaims that everyone has the right to education, that it shall be free, at least, in the elementary and fundamental stages and that elementary education shall be compulsory. This basic human right has been reaffirmed last November in adopting the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

NARRATOR: The World Conference, according to the Secretary-General, was entrusted with the responsibility of bridging the wide gap between the proclaimed rights and the sombre realities: a challenge the sponsors of the Conference told the delegates they were ready to face. Federico Mayor, Director-General of UNESCO spoke on behalf of the sponsoring UN agencies: UNDP, UNICEF, the World Bank and UNESCO:

Cut 3
Mayor
ibid

Firstly, this World Conference brings together a powerful and unique spectrum of world leaders - economic, cultural, scientific, media and political as well as educational. We are today united in the conviction that, more than anything else, it is education that shapes our lives and will determine the destiny of future generations. Secondly, we all want concrete results to flow directly from this Conference. Together with International Literacy Year, our objective is to make a tangible improvement in the lives of millions of children and adults. The World Conference on Education for All is, thus above all, a summons for action.

NARRATOR: Preceeding that action were consultations at regional level to examine and document why a fundamental right which is recognized as the basis for development, is so far from being realized in the greater part of the world.

At the root of the problem in the developing world is poverty. UNESCO Director-General Mayor spoke of glaring inequality in the world:

Cut 4
Mayor
ibid

This World Conference on Education for All takes place at a time when far too many of our fellow human beings are still living in poverty, misery, hunger and squalor. We live in a world of glaring inequality. During the 1980s there has been a net transfer of resources from the poorer countries to the richer, which by 1988 totalled U.S. $50 billion annually. In the same year, the outstanding debts of the developing countries stood at more than $1,000 billion. These are fragile societies.

NARRATOR: President Hussain Muhammad Ershad of Bangladesh, in his address to the Conference highlighted the critical situation of the Least Developed Countries:

Cut 5
Ershad
ibid

We of the Least Developed Countries are virtually frontiersmen. We are struggling to conquer the veritable last frontier of Mankind, the formidable barrier of poverty, hunger, malnourishment, illiteracy and superstition. We are fighting the ancient enemies of humanity. We deserve and welcome assistance from more prosperous nations for it is as much their war, as ours.

READEX FICHE

NARRATOR: The problem of illiteracy is global. The reasons for its existence in the developed world was among the concerns of the World Conference; that although elementary education is compulsory and accessible to all, learning does not always take place. According to experts, addressing a round table discussion entitled "New Warning Signs for Europe," the total number of illiterate people on that continent may be as high as several millions. In Northern Europe, the problem is that of functional illiteracy — adults who attend school but because of lack of exercise of their skills, they lose their ability to read and write. In the South, it is more the lack of access to elementary education. Portugal's illiteracy rate is estimated at as much as 20 per cent. For many parts of the Third World, it is the women who are most affected by the phenomenon:

Lalita Ramdas, representative of a non-governmental organization on women's development and adult literacy in India, is of the opinion that the problem is much more complex than is realized, even by the organizers of the World Conference on Education for All:

Cut 6
Ramdas
UN Radio
Interview
March 1990

The fundamental causes lie in certain feudal and what if I may call patriarchal thinking. In our religion, in our culture, in our philosophies, in our day-to-day beliefs, and it is those that need to be tackled through education. I would say, I think, that there is a big role for women's groups, for other NGO groups, and anyone who really believes and thinks deeply and strongly enough about the women's question. That this sort of perspective must be presented and it must be integrated at all levels into the actual work on the ground.

NARRATOR: Cultural, traditional and religious practices, Lalita Ramdas explains, are a particular impediment to women's education and development. There are the taboos which prevent women from attending classes taught by a man or simply prevent them from leaving the home to attend classes. Where religion is involved, she explains, very often there are also many contradictions:

Cut 7
Ramdas
ibid

What happens is that maybe certain things were said which had a context at a particular point of history. I think we are talking about re-interprating and re-defining what those statements mean in today's context. But rather I would say that the man-made interpretations which have been, I think, included today into religious practice, well, I think a certain power and control is at play. And women have

Cut 7
Ramdas
(Cont'd)

always been, I think, at the receiving end, where they are in fact, made to be the kind of transmitters of religion and culture and all the rest of it. But they are also the most oppressed by religion:

NARRATOR: Dr. Eddah Gachukia of the University of Nairobi explained the reason why the illiteracy rate is so high among African women:

Cut 8
Gachukia
ibid

Women's education in Africa had a late start. The colonial governments almost totally ignored women's education. In fact, it was left to the missionaries to start the first girl's schools in the continent. The African independent governments have done a great deal in the short period that our countries have been independent. Some countries, like Kenya, are talking about equal enrolment of boys and girls, at the primary school level, and really with girls constituting 50 per cent of enrolment, we still have to tackle the problems of drop-out. We have to tackle the problems of those groups that are marginalized, like the nomadic populations, but by-and-large, I think we are making progress. If the overall situation can be sorted out, like -you know- we discussed earlier the economic situation and so forth.

NARRATOR: Marginalized communities, in fact, form a separate and distinct challenge before the world. Of concern were not only the urban populations, but the rural ones as well. Long distances between home and school prevent children from attending school. Poorly trained teachers or untrained teachers, lack of books, poor nutrition and health, all play a negative role in the education of the disadvantaged.

The extreme cases of the world's last hunter/gatherers or distant dwellers and the nomadic populations is a challenge facing several countries. Mexico's Secretary for Education, Lic Manuel Bartlett Diaz discussed the problem of extending elementary education to indigenous Mexicans:

Cut 9
Diaz
ibid

(Spanish, followed by interpretation)
Precisely, one of the problems we face is that the Mexican rural population, the indigenous population, and the marginalized urban population, in fact, those most difficult to help, were left behind in our educational effort, and the results were, therefore, the lowest in these areas. This is why Mexico started, already last year, its basic educational programme for all.

NARRATOR: Africa too, has been developing strategies for extending elementary education to distant dwellers and nomadic peoples. Here again is Dr. Eddah Gachukia of Kenya:

Cut 10
Gachukia
ibid

First of all, perhaps, we should mention that one of our priorities in Africa is, you know, regional, interregional cooperation. Between our countries, we believe we have sufficient expertise and sufficient models from which we could learn, one from the other. In Kenya, for example, we established boarding-schools so that these populations move - the children, at least, can remain in school. Other countries have different models where the school actually follows the population.

NARRATOR: Southern Africa, explained President Daniel Arap Moi of Kenya, had its own problems; among them: apartheid in South Africa:

Cut 11
Moi
World Conference
on Education
for All
Jomtien (Thailand)
5-9 March 1990

Apartheid must be totally dismantled in order for people of all races to have equal opportunities for education in South Africa. (Applause)... The continued armed conflicts in Angola, Mozambique, Sudan and Ethiopia have denied millions of children the right atmosphere for learning.

Cut 12
Mayor
ibid

Never before in history has there been such a gap between the knowledge that could empower people and improve their well-being, and its actual availability to those who most need to know. How can we hope to advance on the road to freedom and democracy, as long as one in every three adults in the world remain illiterate?

NARRATOR: To illustrate just how critical an impact on development elementary education has, Federico Mayor referred back to the issue of women's education:

Cut 13
Mayor
ibid

Education of women and girls is probably the most persuasive example of how human development efforts can synergize and accelerate the development of all aspects of society. Countless research studies have established that basic education and literacy for women has strong, positive effects on family health, fertility rates, dietary habits and household food security... and, last but not least, on children's educational opportunities.

NARRATOR: Summing up his own statement in which he also stressed the value of education as an essential instrument of development, Barber Conable, President of the World Bank referred to education as a vehicle for human self-improvement:

Cut 14
Conable
ibid

A man and a woman, touched by education is no longer the same. The first generation of African National leaders, Tom Mboya has said (quote) "All graduated from two institutions: a mission-school and a jail for political activists." (unquote)

NARRATOR: Facilitating such change in individuals and their communities, is the challenge before the world today.

In our next edition, "Financial Implications of Extending Basic Education to All." That was Perspective produced by the international staff of United Nations Radio and this is Ceciwa Khonje reporting.